

VZCZCXRO4713

OO RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHTRO
DE RUEHRH #1342/01 2801746
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 071746Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1677
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN IMMEDIATE 0248
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0345

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001342

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2019

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KISL PTER SCUL SA

SUBJECT: KING FIRES SENIOR CLERIC OVER KAUST CRITICISM;
SAUDI REACTION POLARIZED

REF: A. RIYADH 1278

1B. JEDDAH 367

1C. JEDDAH 342

RIYADH 00001342 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY & COMMENT

11. (C) A member of the country's highest religious body crossed a red line in public comments critical of King Abdullah's newly launched and controversially coed science and technology university, KAUST, and was quickly fired in response. It was the first time that a Saudi king has unequivocally dismissed a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, and the cleric's criticisms and the King's response have unleashed intense and vitriolic debate between reformers who support the King's vision and conservatives implacably opposed to secular, coed education. The open criticism reflects a conservative backlash to the SAG effort -- led by the King himself -- to counter extremist ideology through education and judicial reforms designed to weaken the power and influence of the most reactionary elements of Saudi Arabia's religious establishment. While the King is likely to prevail -- this is not the first clash between the Al Saud and the clergy over education reforms -- he will be constrained by the reality that most Saudis are uncomfortable with the notion of coed schools. The firing is an emphatic reminder that the King's call for national dialogue does not constitute an invitation to insubordination. Whether this decisiveness will quell or rally reactionary elements remains to be seen. End summary & comment.

KAUST BECOMES A FLASHPOINT

12. (C) The King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) was inaugurated amidst great fanfare and a mixed-gender audience that included heads of state and, unusually, one of the King's wives, on Saudi National Day (ref A). The university, which the Saudi Information Minister recently touted as a "pragmatic" reincarnation of the Abbasid-era House of Wisdom (Bait al-Hikma), is King Abdullah's legacy project, and represents his deeply-felt vision for the Kingdom's future (ref B). He personally oversaw every step of its development, monitoring its construction through webcams from his various offices and residences. His inaugural remarks emphasized the importance of faith and tolerance in the pursuit of science and future development. The lavish ceremony was broadcast live to great acclaim, though the scenes of officially sanctioned mixed-gender festivities were apparently beyond the pale for conservatives for whom the notion that reform requires mixed-gender education is an anathema. In addition, while

many Saudis support the King's efforts to promote education, most are uncomfortable with the idea of coed schools. As Ref C points out, even many of the Muslim students at KAUST have balked at coed activities, and sorting out the degree to which men and women mingle is among the new institution's growing pains.

THE KING'S MAN TURNS AGAINST HIM

¶3. (C) While leading clerics have made no secret of their opposition to gender mixing (indeed, preventing contacts between unrelated males and females is one of the main functions of the religious police), they largely refrained from comments about KAUST, though criticisms of mixing at the inaugural ceremonies began appearing via text messages and on the internet almost immediately. Ironically, the first direct public criticism came from a young and supposedly progressive cleric, Sheikh Sa'ad Nasser Al-Shithri, appointed by the King in 2005 in an attempt to invigorate the Council of Senior Scholars, whose members serve for life and whose average age was over 70. Al-Shithri, who is 42, served concurrently as an adviser to the Royal Court, and was the youngest member of the Council.

A MIX OF EVIL

¶4. (U) Al-Shithri's comments came on September 27 during a live call-in show on the Saudi religious TV channel, Al-Majd, when a caller from Qatar asked for his position on KAUST and the "mixing of the sexes in the land of the Two Holy Mosques," using the term adopted by Al-Qaida to refer to Saudi Arabia. (NOTE: This expression was a red flag for many watchers, who assumed the caller was an Al-Qaida sympathizer.

RIYADH 00001342 002.2 OF 003

End note.) Al-Shithri responded by saying that mixing of the sexes was unacceptable and called for a Shariah Committee to review the university's curriculum and ensure its compatibility with Shariah law, and to prevent the teaching of "deviant ideas" such as "evolution."

A COORDINATED PRESS CAMPAIGN...

¶5. (SBU) Al-Shithri's comments were met by an outcry of criticism (which appeared coordinated, though genuine) in the media, with over 35 editorials and op-ed columns condemning his criticism of the King in nearly every newspaper over two days. Most prominent among them was Al-Watan Editor-in-chief Jamal Khashoggi, who wrote that Al-Shithri owed his position to King Abdullah and therefore should not publicly speak against the King's university. Khashoggi fulminated that such statements were "what Al-Qaida awaits as a pretext and justification for its actions." Other articles took issue with Al-Shithri's view of gender mixing. An article in Jeddah-based Okaz opined that "the term 'mixing of the sexes' is for some in our society a dirty word implying degradation, immorality, and corruption, yet we see it in airports and shopping places and in the Two Holy Mosques, so how can it be viewed with different moral standards in different places?" An editorial in the daily Al-Jazeera maintained that "offering advice to the ruler through the media was unacceptable on principle."

...AND A SUMMARY DISMISSAL

¶6. (SBU) Exactly a week following his criticism, in an unprecedented and swift (by Saudi standards) move, the Royal Diwan issued a statement announcing tersely that Al-Shithri had been "relieved" of his duties. Though clashes, and even violence, between reforming royals and recalcitrant clerics have erupted periodically since Saudi Arabia's founding, this was the first time a member of the Council of Senior Scholars

was dismissed. In the Sharia system, the Council is the functional equivalent of the US Supreme Court, and its highly respected members are expected to serve for life.

"MIXED" PUBLIC REACTION

¶17. (C) Reaction to the dismissal has been divided, and met with some dismay even by so-called liberals. Jamal Khashoggi (protect) told a group of Mission officers that Al-Watan would play the controversy down, acknowledging that even he had qualms about coed education. One female reader wrote on Al-Watan's website that the country was "plagued by two groups of extremists. The first are those who seek to deny the country knowledge, advancement and openness. The second wish to bring in corruption and excessive openness. They both represent a danger to religion, science as advancement."

Popular blogspot "Saudi Jeans" commented that decision makers and the media "will tow the king's line" to "gain political capital" and "to retain their positions as confidantes and power brokers." The blogspot pointed out that both the religious establishment and the media used the king's official backing against each other: liberals by claiming to have the King's support and pointing to conservatives as being in the way of reform and development; conservatives by claiming to have the support of the King and accusing reformers of destroying the fundamental religious principles of their country. Human Rights Activist Mohammad Al-Qahtani (protect) opined that the firing punished Sheikh Al-Shithri for doing his job as a religious scholar (i.e., giving his opinion), which only served to further limit freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia.

CONTINUED CLERICAL DEFIANCE

¶18. (U) While clerics have generally remained noncommittal in public, expressions of support have appeared on the internet, with some prominent colleagues (though thus far none on the Council of Senior Scholars) defending Al-Shithri's stance. An op-ed piece by cleric Sheikh Salman Al-Duwaysh summed up conservative opinion: "The worst thing in morals is the corruption that is taking place due to mixing with women on the basis of claiming to educate them and to open the field for them to undertake jobs for which they were not created. This continued until women abandoned their basic duties such as housekeeping, bringing up children, and guiding the youths, who are the offspring of these women, and the hope for the future, to everything that includes the love of the country and good ethics. Women have forgotten their ethical

RIYADH 00001342 003.2 OF 003

duties, such as the love of the family, which is the backbone of the nation, and replaced this by beautifying themselves and wantonness claiming that this is part of progress and civilization. No, by God, this is not civilization."

¶19. (C) Khashoggi (protect) remarked that the visceral opposition to gender-mixing was rooted in ancient concepts of tribal honor. The conservative clerics feared that secularization would result in a loss of identity and influence. "It's a logical fear," he concluded, "in this they are right." It is a debate that has been waged across centuries, and it is unlikely to be resolved any time soon.
SMITH